Joseph A. Califano Jr. Post 11-25-74

Gen. Brown and Foreign Policy

In the course of patently anti-Semitic remarks, Gen. George Scratchley Brown, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said recently that (1) the United States had "no plans" to use force in the Middle East; 2) he could conjure up a "Seven Days in May" situation where in the face of another oil embargo the American people might "get tough-minded enough to set down the Jewish influence in this country and break that lobby"; 3) when the Israelis come to us for equipment they have the Congress in their hip pocket; 4) the Jews own "the banks in this country, the newspapers, you just look at where the Jewish money is in this country"; 5) the "terrible disruption" of another oil embargo on Europe and Japan could precipitate another demand that something be done; 6) the flow of money to Middle East and Persian Gulf oil producers would put "all of the money . . . in their corner of the bank . . . seven or eight hundred billion dollars and they are going to be the world's banker"; and 7) the Arabs are taking on a role "they aren't equipped to handle." He concluded by reassuring the Arabs and Soviets that he did not "intend to go off to war in the Middle East, if that's the question."

Thus, in the context of the most explosive situation in the world today — the one situation most likely to precipitate a major war involving not only the Israelis and the Arabs but our country and the Soviet Union — the chairman of the Joint Chiefs vented his spleen on the Israelis, the Arabs, the American Jews, the Congress, and informed the world that he didn't intend to go to war in the Middle East.

Gen. Brown's audience was not limited to a handful of law students at Duke University. His audiences included the American public at large, the Israelis, the Arabs, the Soviets, the Chinese, the U.N, the President, the Secretaries of State and Defense and fellow military officers. His apology to the Jewish War Veterans may have saved his job for the moment, but it is not likely to affect the way these critical audiences read him in the future.

What is Gen. Brown's credibility with the Israelis today? A few days after publication of the general's remarks in The Post, the Pentagon disputed a report by Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin that the Soviets had some 20 ships unloading arms in a Syrian port. The Pentagon said that number of ships was normal and that, contrary to what Rabin said, only a few of the ships were unloading arms. Who are we to believe—a JCS Chairman, who under pressure from the Secretary of Defense recanted his anti-Semitic comments, or the Prime Minister of Israel?

How do the Arabs feel knowing that the top military officer of the United States believes they are incompetent to handle the money that is flowing to them? What is the Soviet reaction to Gen. Brown's publicly stated reluctance to fight for the Israelis in the Middle East? And to his thinly veiled hope that the American people will "put down the Jewish influence in this country"?

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What about Gen. Brown's credibility at home? Unquestionably, there is a powerful pro-Israel lobby in Washington. But there is also a potent oil lobby in town and the Middle East desk at the State Department has been known on Capitol Hill to lean decidedly toward the Arabs. Does anyone believe that the Congress is such a pawn — as Gen. Brown seems to think — that they can be turned off and on by the pro-Israel lobby at will? Does the general believe that collective congressional motivations are so simple-minded? Anyone who has dealt with the Congress must recognize how demeaning Gen. Brown's remarks are to Senate and House members.

Finally, there are the American Jews. Many American Jews, who initially called for Brown's removal, backed off for fear that such action would be interpreted as confirmation of their alleged power. Perhaps—only perhaps—that is why President Ford and Secretary Schlesinger decided merely to slap Gen. Brown on the wrist. If so, they have all missed the point. That may be understandable in the case of American Jewry in view of their emotional involvement in this nasty business. It is inexcusable for the general, the Secretary and the President.

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Offensive as Brown's comments about American Jews are, his grevious national security sin is that he has irreparably damaged his ability to serve effectively as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. If he testifies before the Congress or makes recommendations to the President that favor the Arabs and those recommendations are made known to the public, what credibility will he have? Indeed, is he likely, consciously or unconsciously, unduly to favor the Israelis to prove that he is not anti-Semitic? In short, Gen. Brown has no business speaking about foreign or domestic policy; his public remarks should be limited to defense matters. This should be the role for all Defense Department officers, but the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is not just another general. He is the only military officer that truly has frequent opportunities to communicate with the President and the congressional leadership. Compare the general's remarks about the Israelis, the Arabs, the Congress, the American Jews and the dollar problem with the provision in DOD Directive 5230.13, issued by then Secretary Robert McNamara on May 31, 1961:

"In public discussions all officials of the Department (of Defense) should confine themselves to defense matters. They should particularly avoid discussion of foreign policy matters, a field which is reserved for the President and the Department of State."

That Defense Department policy, which was repealed on March 4, 1969, by then Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, was the subject of months of controversial hearings in 1961 and 1962 by the Senate Armed Services Committee and its Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee.

In the early stages of those hearings, McNamara was royally roasted for issuing that directive, but by the time the hearings had ended, the committee (with Sen. Strom Thurmond dissenting) approved the directive (with some DOD hedging in recognition of the difficulty of drawing precise lines between military and foreign affairs) and the propriety of limiting public statements by military officers to defense matters.

The restriction on the subject matter of speeches by military officers began to get formalized under President Truman. Eisenhower reaffirmed Truman's policy in a Cabinet meeting on March 11, 1960, where he stated that

no speech affecting foreign relations should be made by an administration official without prior clearance from the State Department. Within three weeks of assuming office, President Kennedy publicly associated his administration with the Truman-Eisenhower policy. The McNamara directive drew on these consistent presidential precedents.

In response to questions about the Brown comments, Defense spokesman William Beecher reaffirmed the prior clearance procedures for "a formal speech—written speech" but noted that the current Defense Department policy on public statements answering questions of informal or written speeches by a military officer is simply that, "He uses his discretion." When asked "whether there's any policy saying that you are discouraged or ordered not to engage"—presumably in public discussions of foreign or domestic policy—Beecher cut the question off with a brusque "there is no such policy." He stated that there was no intention to revise or even clarify policy on military officers making public statements. This is the glaring failure of the President and the Secretary of Defense in handling the Brown incident.

The only sure way to put this matter to rest is to reinstitute the McNamara order that Laird revoked. As the Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee concluded in 1962, "one of the truly great bulwarks of our system of government is the principle of civilian control of the military through the executive branch of the government of which the military is a part." President Ford and Secretary Schlesinger should reaffirm that principle in the particulars of this case.

The personal tragedy of Gen. Brown is his failure to evidence any true appreciation of the extent to which his effectiveness is impaired. Brown should re-examine his decision to hang on as chairman of the JCS. After the riots in Panama in 1964, as Army counsel I spent about a month defending the actions of the U.S. military command there before a group of international jurists and the Organization of American States. Both bodies eventually concluded that the United States had not exerted any force beyond that necessary to protect the inhabitants of the Canal Zone and that the military commander, Gen. Andrew O'Meara, had performed just about perfectly in a singularly difficult situation. On my last night in Panama, Gen. O'Meara asked me to dinner. He knew that he would be vindicated, but he said, "When you get back to Washington, tell Secretary McNamara that he will have to move me out of this command if he wants to pursue negotiations with the Panamanians. I have become a symbol that will make fruitful negotiations impossible."

There is a lesson for Gen. Brown in that heroic incident.